

Shelter From the Storm

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Shelter From the Storm

Try imagining a place where it's always safe and warm

"Come in," she said,

"I'll give you shelter from the storm."

The bus was nearly empty so late at night, but the little boy dozing on his shoulder kept Robert Rumsey alert despite their long journey. They had been in transit for eighteen hours and on four different buses, and both father and son were feeling the effects of the exhaustion. But while Bailey dozed, Bobby could hardly contain his nervous energy.

By now, Milah had to have realized that they'd left. Was she angry? Worried? Would she come looking for them or would she even care? There was a part of him that wanted desperately to call her and reassure her that they were okay and Bae would be taken care of. He'd always done it before, and each time she'd always said he was overreacting and told him to come home so they could talk. She'd always promise that things would be better, and they would be for a little while until they were worse again.

Bae was stirring a little and he shushed his son, brushing curly black hair off the boy's face so he could see the faded green and yellow mark on his son's cheek just below his left eye. He still didn't know where it had come from as neither Milah nor Bae had been willing to tell him any specifics, but that had to be the final straw. He could live with many things, but he couldn't let his son be hurt.

It had taken him longer than he'd have liked to secure a place somewhere, but he was friendless with no family to speak of and had a child to look after and none of the local shelters accepted men unless they were homeless. Finally, he'd found a place with a separate facility for men and older teenage boys that could take them in.

He'd waited until Milah was gone out with her friends and helped Bae pack a bag, being sure that he brought Mr. Bear and the book they'd been reading before bed. He left his cell phone on the nightstand and withdrew all the money from his personal accounts. It wasn't much, but it was enough to purchase tickets to get them to the shelter and hopefully enough to help them get a fresh start someplace else.

It was getting close to midnight when the bus finally pulled to their stop, and he was forced to shake his son awake. There was no way for him to carry the bags and his son with his limp. Bae didn't complain as he took his father's hand and disembarked the bus and Bobby was so proud of him for being so good even though it had been an exhausting day for everyone.

The shelter was a compound with a privacy fence surrounding two buildings on opposite sides of a playground. He had to check in with a security guard who compared his driver's license to a list of names before they were allowed inside the gate with instructions to check in with the building on the left. They had to be buzzed in, but he felt oddly light as they finally stepped inside. There was a woman sitting at a desk whose eyes instantly went to his with a world weary sort of evaluation that seemed to pin him in place. Her expression softened quite a bit as she took in Bailey with his fading black eye, though, and when she turned her attention back towards Bobby she seemed less suspicious.

"Can I help you?" she said.

"I spoke to someone on the phone earlier," he said as he nervously set his license on her desk. "Robert and Bailey Rumsey."

She scanned a list before double checking his identification again.

"Alright," she said, handing the card back to him. "You two can come with me."

The woman stood up and led them towards a brightly lit staircase. Bae was visibly exhausted by this point, trailing behind his father and forcing the entire procession to go a little slower.

"You'll be in a room together," the lady said. "Most of the people here are older teenagers, but we occasionally get adult men. The women and most of the children stay in the other building, but your son will be able to play with them when it's daylight. You're not allowed into the other building, and they aren't allowed in this one."

He was trying to remember what she said as she told him about the school district and the rules for using the phone, but the details were starting to blur together after such a long day. He wasn't allowed to tell anyone where he lived, wasn't allowed guests, and wasn't allowed to fraternize with any of the other residents - as

though he had any interest in doing so after everything else. He just wanted to put his son to bed and try to put his life together again.

Finally, they were given a room and left alone. It looked like a college dorm room right down to the built in desks and cinderblock walls, but Bae would be safe here and that was the important part.

Bae had to be coaxed into staying awake long enough to change into his pajamas, but Bobby wanted to maintain whatever normalcy he could for as long as he could, and he tucked the boy into bed with Mr. Bear, only skipping reading to him from their usual routine in deference to Bae's exhaustion.

As tired as he was, once he was laying on the thin mattress across the room from Bailey he was suddenly wide awake. Even having planned this for the better part of a week, it was hard to believe it had really happened and there was a part of him that was convinced that when he woke up they'd be back in the little house with Milah and it all would have been wasted. He wasn't sure if he was more afraid that he'd never left, or that he finally really had.

It was late morning when Bobby finally woke up. It took him a little while to remember where he was, but the bone weariness he still felt eased into a strange sense relaxation. He'd gotten away, and they were safe.

Bae was kneeling on his bed looking out the window, and apparently completely oblivious to his father's state of consciousness. Bobby smiled at his son's curiosity even after everything else that he'd gone through this week. It was a reminder of why it had been so important to leave.

"Good morning," he said, drawing the boy's attention from the window.

Bailey hopped down off the bed instantly, coming to hug his father.

"Good morning," Bae said at last. "I was very quiet."

"Yes you were," Bobby replied. "You could have woken me, though."

"I was okay," Bae said. "You were tired."

He couldn't deny the truth of his son's statement, and he had desperately needed to sleep. He just hoped that there would be some way to feed both of them this time of day, but he didn't want to make Bae worry about it. Once they were a bit more settled he could see about going to the store and buying a few snacks to keep in the room, but for now they would be at the mercy of the shelter staff. He did remember passing a dining room on the way in, but he was going to have to figure out the details of the schedule on the fly.

"Can I play on the swings?" Bae asked after a minute, and Bobby remembered the playground from the night before. Bae must have been watching the other children playing through the window.

"Of course you can," Bobby said. "Let's just get dressed and we can

go downstairs."

Bae was thankfully old enough to get himself dressed with minimal help from his father, so it didn't take too long before both were ready to head downstairs.

The kitchen had a light turned on, and a pair of girls in their early twenties inside of it confirmed that they had missed breakfast but cereal was available for both father and son regardless of the time. These were apparently volunteers from the local college who came in to help the staff with preparing meals, a task that was especially crucial in this building where Bobby was the only proper adult. The two girls fussed sweetly over Bae and were kind enough to prepare the cereal for both of them after realizing that Bobby relied heavily on his cane.

"We don't get to see many children in this building," one of them explained as they giggled over Bae.

"Have you been working here long?" he asked, realizing that these two might be a valuable source of information on their new home.

"I have," one said. "My name is Mary, and this is Ariel. We're both studying social work at the college, but this is my third year and her first."

"How many other people live here?" he asked her as Bae tucked into his Fruit Loops. "We haven't seen anyone else yet."

"Well, it's Sunday," Mary said. "Most of the boys are asleep still or else at their jobs. It'll be a little busier on the other side with the kids in it. But in this building there are about a dozen other residents, although it can house quite a few more. Most of them are runaways of some sort, but there are some who came with their mothers and younger siblings."

"They're not allowed to stay with their families?" he said, a little bit shocked by that. It seemed abysmally unfair to him to separate them if that was true.

"They have the choice," she explained. "A lot of them do stay with their families, but some prefer being here. It's a lot less crowded and I think they get uncomfortable being in such close proximity to so many women. This place can sometimes get a little bit like a frat house without the beer," she smiled fondly before seeming to realize that she may have startled him. "Or...like a summer camp. They're good kids, but you know how boys are in groups."

He did, and he certainly didn't expect a house full of teenagers to be quiet. He just needed to make sure he kept a close eye on his son to keep him away from any bad influences.

"Are they in school?"

"Oh yeah," Mary replied. "And a lot of them work, too. One of the volunteers here helps you find a job if you need one, and there's another one who can help you get your son enrolled in school. The bus comes right to the front of the building and everything."

He thanked her for her information. A lot of it sounded familiar and

he was sure the desk lady must have relayed a lot of it the night before when he'd been so tired. The girls reminded them both that there would be lunch of some sort at noon if they wanted and peanut butter and jelly if they missed it. He wasn't sure how much would be handled by staff and volunteers yet, but it did make sense that the social work students would be around. They probably got class credit for being there, and he couldn't begrudge it to them. The girls even took the bowls from them with a smile and popped them into the dishwasher, though he was sure that wouldn't be something he should count on happening too often.

Bae dashed outside ahead of his father and was already sitting on the swingset and kicking his feet to get himself going just the way they'd practiced at the park at home. the idea of home hit Bobby like a fist. That wasn't home anymore, he realized. He'd spent years with Milah saving and working to try to make sure Bailey had a house to grow up in and now here they were in a shelter two states away. He'd left his job and most of their belongings behind and he wasn't sure where they'd ever find a place of their own again.

The absolute hopelessness of his situation washed over him. Maybe he'd made a mistake in all of this. He'd gambled Bae's future on this and he still had to file for a divorce and possibly go through a custody battle. God, he hadn't let himself think about custody yet. He absolutely couldn't afford it, and with being a single father would the courts even believe him about the abuse? She'd get unsupervised visitation at the very least and nobody would be there to protect his son. He shouldn't have left, should he?

He was struck with an overwhelming urge to call his wife. He'd never left like this before, she had to understand his concerns and maybe she'd be willing to try marriage counseling this time and they could make things work. The realization that he had no way to call sunk into him after a moment and left him clenching and unclenching his hands anxiously. Maybe once Bae was in school he could sneak away and give her a call and they could try to talk it out.

Bailey had gotten off the swing and was chatting with another child on the climbing tower. This little boy was a bit on the thin side and had wide eyes that looked like they'd seen too much. Bobby felt like he was looking into a mirror for a moment but he shook it off, glancing around for the child's mother. There were a handful of women scattered around the other side of the playground, each one watching the children intensely. Some stood alone, and a few were talking amongst themselves. He imagined there probably wouldn't be a safer place for a child to play than right here. That thought eased his worry a bit, because if nothing else here he didn't need to worry about Bae being left alone with his mother.

There was a small brunette woman standing a ways off holding a cigarette in her hand, though she didn't seem to be watching the children. He guessed she was probably a fairly recent addition as well, due to the bruises ringing her neck. She was watching him curiously, the way he'd seen Bae watch other children in the park sometimes when he wasn't sure how to approach them. He couldn't imagine why she'd be interested in talking to him, though.

Still, he found his attention drawn to her more and more as he watched his son playing. It was a strange sort of curiosity, but they were both in this place and he hadn't realized he was lonely until

she'd started watching him. After a few more minutes of this, she made her way over to him slowly.

"Hi," she said, reaching into her jacket pocket to pull out half a pack of cigarettes. "Would you like one?"

"No, thank you," he said. "I don't smoke."

"Me either," she replied as she dropped hers to the dirt and stamped it out. "But it makes a good excuse for not talking to anyone else if you don't want to, and it's a good conversation starter if you need one."

He wasn't sure how to respond to that admission, so he said nothing.

"I'm Belle," she continued.

"Bobby," he said. "My son Bailey is the one in the green jacket."

"I don't have one," she said. "Which is why I wanted the excuse to be outside."

"Yeah?"

"It's hard to think with too many people around."

He wanted to point out he was people, but he also found it strangely comforting to have someone talking to him. He'd been afraid of the loss of normalcy, and this was weird and awkward but it was a good sort of awkward. It was almost like being a whole person.

"So what brings you here?" she asked him, and the world came crashing back in again. "You can feel free to tell me to go to hell," she continued. "It's just that this isn't my first time in and I don't remember ever seeing a man here before. You can probably guess what brought me in."

She said the last part while rubbing her neck idly in a way that made him want to pack her bags for her and send her away someplace she'd be safe.

"My son," he said softly. "I came home one day and he had a black eye."

"Oh," she breathed the syllable, looking back towards the playground. "His mother?"

"Yeah," he said, nodding a little. "She's never touched him before as far as I know, but let's just say it wasn't as surprising as it should have been."

"I'm sorry," she said, turning back towards him. "I shouldn't have pried."

"It's alright," he replied. "I imagine coming here is a pretty good indicator of what happened. What about you? Husband?"

"Boyfriend," she corrected a little bitterly. "I went out with some friends and stayed out later than I'd planned. It was my own fault

for not telling him where I was."

"So he choked you?"

He couldn't wrap his head around the whole thing. She was so pretty, why did she stay with someone who could do that to her?

"He was drinking," she said. "I know it sounds awful when I say it like that. This time I'm not going back, though. I'm not going to let him talk me back into it."

"That's good," he said because he had no idea what else to say.

She didn't sound nearly as convinced as he thought she wanted to, and he had this vision in his head of her pretty blue eyes staring blankly at nothing. He shook the image away and sought out Bae almost on instinct. His son was chasing the other little boy around the playground. He'd gotten his son out in time. If nothing else, he'd saved Bailey.

End
file.